

A Thousand Crucifixions

According to Sally Nelson, the more submerged we become in a culture of materialism, the less able we are to respond to suffering. It may be for this reason that her Whitley Lecture, *A Thousand Crucifixions*, guides us through terrain that feels deeply uncomfortable as she leads us to a vision of compassionate Christian living. This is a study that is well presented and argued, but that arises from, and seeks a context for, personal stories of suffering.

She identifies ‘materialism’ as a major cultural force that has sunk its roots so deeply into our ways of thinking and acting that it is virtually impossible to see it. Such a culture imbibes its inhabitants with a particular way of being, one in which individuals are judged to be human to the extent that they are able to make choices, enjoy freedoms and make themselves useful. Suffering is thus to be avoided at all costs, and where we do encounter it, it must be treated as an anomaly – something to be solved, or some purposeful meaning ascribed to it. Given such a vision of humanity, disabled people struggle to be regarded as fully human.

The manner in which disabled people are shown compassion in a materialist community is to treat them as ‘them’, to regard ‘them’ as the responsibility of their nearest carers, to act generously towards ‘them’, but finally not to allow ‘them’ to become part of ‘us’. Even in Christian communities this materialism diminishes the genuine humanity both of disabled people and of well-meaning Church members. Hence the subtitle, *‘The Materialist Subversion of the Church?’*

At the heart of Baptist community is a serious desire for dialogue, for genuine listening to those who are ‘other’ than us. This listening can be a painful process because entails a readiness to embody compassion, literally, to ‘suffer-with’ others. But in so doing, the value of people is transformed beyond categories of ‘usefulness’, (disabled people have limited value as ‘human resources’). Instead the value of all people is determined rather by the way that we receive ourselves back from them as renewed people ourselves.

Sally Nelson’s own experience of coping with a disabled daughter surfaces throughout the lecture, giving voice to a voiceless person, and allowing that voice both to articulate defensible academic critique and to make practical appeal to our churches. In so doing, this lecture models what it also calls for, making it a lively, practical and deeply encouraging call to genuine compassion.